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“Saving the Jews of Denmark”

Of all the countries of German-occupied Europe, only Denmark rescued virtually all its Jews. With their long tradition of tolerance toward the Jews, most Danes did not regard the Danish Jews as a “problem.” As a highly assimilated and integrated minority, Danish Jews were accepted and respected. They were regarded as Danes like any others. Denmark was invaded and occupied in 1940. Danes were considered “Ayrans” by the Germans. Their languages were related, and the ties between the two countries had been close. At first, the Danes were allowed to run the country without a great deal of interference by the occupying Nazis, and the Danish Jews were not persecuted. But in 1943, even they were no longer exempt from the “Final Solution.” Plans for the deportation of Jews were leaked to Danish political leaders by their German sources.

On September 17, 1943, a list of Jews was confiscated from the Jewish community. It was clear that trouble was coming. On September 28, a German naval official, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, alerted a leader of the Danish Social Democratic party that an *Aktion*, or military action, was coming. The warning was taken seriously, and the Danish response was quick. Fishermen, farmers, businessmen, taxi drivers, doctors, and clergymen joined in a well-coordinated clandestine, or secret, effort to spirit the Jews out of the country before they could be deported.

On the eve of the Jewish New Year, synagogue services in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, were cancelled, and the rabbi told his anxious community to go into hiding. Jews left Copenhagen and other cities by train, car, taxi, and on foot. Hiding places were found in homes, hospitals, and churches in coastal towns and their nearby farms. Then the Jews were to leave Denmark by sea. The Lutheran Bishop of Copenhagen, H. Fuglsang-Damgaard, openly urged Danes to protect the Jews, proclaiming:

“Whenever persecutions are undertaken for racial or religious reasons, it is the duty of the Christina Church to protest against it for the following reasons:...

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The persecution of the Jews is irreconcilable [doesn't match with] with the humanitarian concept of love of neighbors, which follows from the message which the Church of Jesus Christ is commissioned to proclaim. With Christ there is no respect of persons, and he has taught us that every man is precious in the eyes of God....

Race and religion can never be in themselves a reason for depriving a man of his rights, freedom, or property. We shall therefore struggle to ensure the continued guarantee to our Jewish brothers and sisters of [the] same freedom which we ourselves treasure more than life....

We are obliged by our conscience to maintain the law and to protest against any violation of human rights. Therefore we desire to declare unambiguously our allegiance to the word, we must obey God rather than the man."

One wonders what might have happened had other Churches taken a similar stance. The Catholic Church was in a unique position to know what was happening to victims around Europe because their large group of priests heard confessions in all kinds of communities. The Vatican was among the first to know of the genocidal programs at death camps. However, they did not speak out.

In Denmark, money had to be raised to rent fishing boats at a cost of between 1,000 and 10,000 kroner per boat. Many individual Jews were able to pay for boats themselves, and the Jewish community used their valuables to get a loan they would repay it after the war. Many Danes spontaneously offered to help. Leo Goldberger recalled that his father did not have the money to pay for passage on a fishing boat. In despair, he boarded a train back to Copenhagen from the coast.

"As luck would have it, on the train a woman whom he knew only slightly recognized him and inquired about his agitated facial expressions. He confided our plight. Without a moment's hesitation the lady promised she would take care of everything.... True to her word, she met my father later in the day.... The money would be forthcoming from a pastor Henry Rasmussen. The sum was a fairly large one – about 25,000 Danish crowns [kroner], 5,000 per person [for his family of five], which was more than my

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father's annual salary. Though it was a loan, the pastor refused repayment after the war."

The equivalent of more than \$600,000 was spent in the rescue effort. Scores of Danish fishermen risked their lives to save the Jews whose lives were threatened.

In October 1943, 7,220 Jews left Denmark on the fishing boats. Danish police came to help the rescuers; coast guard vessels acted as escorts. For two weeks, the boats ferried them across the narrow strait separating Denmark from Sweden. In Sweden, which had maintained its neutrality during the war, the Jews were could find a safe haven. In 1943, German troops were in retreat on several fronts – from El Alamein in North Africa, to Stalingrad in the east. Allied troops were advancing to Italy. The Swedish government, which could see that the defeat of Germany was only a matter of time, offered sanctuary to the Jews despite its official neutrality, with the full realization that Germany would regard this action as hostile.

More than 90% of the Jews in Denmark escaped deportation to Nazi concentration camps. When the deportations took place, fewer than 500 Jews were rounded up. Almost all the Jews left in Denmark were transported to the "model ghetto" Theresienstadt.

Historians have wondered what made the Danish experience unique in Europe. According to popular legend, King Christian X served as a noble example by publicly wearing the yellow star as a sign that he identified with the Jews. He is supposed to have worn it prominently on his regular morning horseback rides through the center of Copenhagen. Although the King did express solidarity with the Jews and publicly spoke against deportation, he never actually donned the yellow star.

Danes at every level of society, from fishermen to high government officials, have said they did nothing special. They simply treated Jews as the neighbors they were, and one does not allow the enemy who occupies one's country to deport neighbors. The explanation for their behavior may well be as simple as that. Jørgen Keller said: "Many of us came from the organized resistance, but others came spontaneously when they were needed. National independence and democracy were our common goals, but the persecution of the Jews added a new and

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overwhelming dimension to our fight against Hitler – human rights.” Keller was later asked if the Jews should feel grateful to their rescuers. “I am not sure that the Danish resistance movement would have gained the strength which it actually did, had it not been for the inspiration we received from the Jews,” he said. “Jews don’t owe us gratitude; rather, we owe each other mutual friendship.”

Jews in Denmark had long been treated as nothing more or less than Danish citizens. The Danish people resisted German pressure to divide their nation between Jews and non-Jews, regarding Nazi behavior toward Jews in Denmark as an outrage to the entire nation. Even Hitler treated Denmark with respect, and German occupation policies there were less invasive than in any other occupied country. The country’s democratic institutions were still in place on the eve of the deportations, and at the moment of crisis the Danish people were united in their determination that their nation not be divided.

The Danish rescue effort did not end in October 1943. Refugee property was carefully protected. Homes and their contents were inventoried, and businesses placed in trusts, where they were operated by others, but ownership remained with the displaced citizens. Torah scrolls and other holy objects were stored in churches and returned intact to the Jewish community after the war. Non-Jewish relatives who remained behind were supported. The Danish government was persistent in checking up on its citizens who were deported to Theresienstadt. Packages were sent. In an attempt to alleviate Danish concerns, the Germans allowed a special Red Cross visit to the camp in 1944, even though what the visitors saw was a hoax. Danish Jews were the first prisoners to return home after liberation. Of the 464 Jews deported, only 51 perished.

Berenbaum, Michael. *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. 158-161. Print.

